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That Blackfella Bloodsucka Dance!

PROLOGUE: THE GODS HAVE TEETH.

“Wrong colour for ink. Their lives weren’t worth staining pages for.”

- Jennifer Martiniello, “Unboxed”, in *Writing Us Mob: New Indigenous Voices*, Canberra: Abreaction, 1996: 84.

Yea and verily, Good Reader of these blood-tainted, sweat-soiled and unpleasantly stained pages, please be warned! For ye shall soon be entering a strange, perplexing nether-world: a rare nexus between the contemporary existence of the Aboriginal Australian and the squalid world of The Undead.

And know ye too, that the broad, sun-abraded continent from which this tale takes its geography, is vastly different to the traditionally superstitious realm of tiny ... Transylvania. Ah ha! Didst ye not involuntarily gasp upon reading the name of that evil-racked, war-torn country? Yea, and didst not that same name produce (as it nearly always does), an immediate intellectual association in ye poor, suffering cerebellum with the reddest of blood so horribly and unnaturally spilt?

Relax ye, Good Reader, please do not overly fret, for such vexation is a common response and that is as it should be. But know ye too that this vast nation is now (as compared to that sorrow-drenched European home of the despicable, bloodsucking Vampire), a wonderfully lucky country: blissfully free, it would at first appear, from primordial curses and fates inescapable.

Indeed, this bright, promising land has - in what the majority of ye would call the 21st Century of Christendom - a standard of living the envy of many other countries, even with their considerably older histories of human occupation. For those misguided 'civilised' peoples are to be remembered best for their fervently murderous attempts at appeasing we vengefully petty old bastards who are known to ye humans as ... The Gods.

That's me and my celestial companions, in case ye are slow in the uptake.

Know ye too, that due to its isolation, the nation of Australia is still just an innocent and mewling babe in arms, as nations go. Unless, of course, one considers the experience of the first inhabitants. For the Land Down Under has been the home of the Indigenous Aborigine for somewhere between 40,000 and 60,000 years, according to the learned archaeologists and their carbon dating methodologies, that is, and they are the most ancient of all surviving cultures.

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Unhindered by writing skills or the inconsistent rules of English grammar, the tribal Elders pass on their accumulated knowledge diligently, through song-lines and traditional melodic verse, as they have done for millennia, and the Aboriginal children are well-taught and respectful.

Yet none of the Aboriginal seers had ever imagined the stories of the Virgin Mary who gave birth to a saviour - with the now famous name of Jesus - a man who performed miracles and came back from the dead. Nor had they imagined the much sadder stories their children would one day learn of the White Man infatuated with notions of ethnic superiority, who perfected his plans to profit from the First Nations of Australia under the fraud of Terra nullius. Nor had they imagined the ignoble trade in slavery that made the subjugation of dark-skinned people so very lucrative for those pale-skinned merchants without a conscience to trouble them (but with a gun beneath their pillow during sleep).

These inequities were completely unknown to the Aboriginal Australian storytellers, and in their case, one might argue, this pre-invasion epoch of ignorance was bliss.

But so very cheerless as it is to tell, in the 19th and 20th Century their descendents were fated to lives of despair and sorrow. All too soon they were to learn the horror-filled stories of the European man's exploitation of the coloured man, once the white-skinned Captain Cook's sea-going vessel named The Endeavour suddenly appeared (with its portentously white sails catching the sky like the canvas wings of an offshore flying monster) in the natural harbour that the English would impertinently name 'Botany Bay' and then, finally, label with the demeaning tag of 'Sydney'.

James Cook landed and he arrogantly claimed the entire continent for his distant sovereign so they could begin setting up the jails for her hordes of transported convicts. 'First Contact', the university-educated anthropologists now call that momentous event, as if Australian history only began at that fateful first Whitefella footfall. It was to prove to be a gut churning lurch of

history, one that would propel Aboriginal Australian humanity into pages no-one had before contemplated. Meanwhile, we gods continued to indulge in our celestial rumbles and punch-ups, with ye mere mortals at our feet serving as lowly pawns, simple playthings, like little wind-up toys we had created for our occasional amusement.

Yea and verily, Good Reader, know ye that the European invasion of the late 18th Century quickly changed all the Australian Indigene's notions of the world as the population of invading Europeans swelled dreadfully, like a pus-filled boil, into a full-blown armed attempt at genocide. A sustained and lethal force was unleashed, a governmentally approved National Policy designed to heartlessly eradicate the inconvenient truth of Aboriginal Sovereignty.

Subjected to a pseudo-official agenda of extermination (not to mention the non-intentional biological agents of tuberculosis, influenza, smallpox, syphilis and alcohol), it wasn't long before the original inhabitants of this unforgiving terrain learnt of the perils, paradoxes and hypocritical pratfalls of Christianity.

The White Man was intent on forcing the 'truths' of European religion down their black throats and into their innocent psyches and so the different tribes of Aborigines then each responded by insolently giving the White Man with his lethal barking sticks a label: Balanda is perhaps the most common today, although many other names have since disappeared from use as they too, the speakers of their own distinct languages, disappeared from Country.

Know ye, Good Reader, that those targeted in these massacres were not just the proud Aboriginal warrior men, who nobly leant their braces of spears against the immobile gum trees in cautious displays of wary truce, only to then be cowardly mown down by the European invader's musket and sword. Not only these Aboriginal barefoot soldiers were slaughtered, but the Lubras and Piccaninnies, too: all were regarded by the cold, murdering colonisers as feral pests, nothing more than noxious, annoying vermin to be brutally eradicated.

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The Whitefellas preyed on the Blackfellas of this land ruthlessly. All Aboriginal Australians were treated with an officially dispensed administration of careless, casual pogrom, for the Aboriginal people were considered by only a precious few to be human. Not until the government's referendum of 1967 were they considered to even be of equivalent biology to white people, and, unlike the nation's sheep, until this time the Aboriginal Australian wasn't included in the national census. It would still be years from this date, however, before the last Aboriginal child was stolen from its mother's arms in the hate-filled, racist name of assimilation.

Naturally, the untamed and resentful Blackfellas struggled with Christianity's illogic, its self-serving duplicity and its outdated misogyny. But regardless of the original inhabitant's allegedly pagan, non-Christian history, the Terra firma named New Holland on the first maps and then re-named Terra nullius when it came to staking out ownership of farms and townships, was the ancestral home to these First Australian people who have always intuitively known that this island continent hosts numerous denizens of the Underworld.

These evil entities are hiding there, dry and dust-like in its mulga plains; unseen in the cold recesses of its limestone cliffs and granite boulders; sequestered in the bubbling, seething brown scum that floats upon the calm surfaces of its billabongs; and nestled safely where the water is molecular and warm amongst the roots of its tidal mangrove swamps. All these Australian landscapes - and many others, too - contain at least some vaguely tenable memory of long past and distant inequity, and it is waiting, waiting, waiting, like a dormant, genderless virus.

Waiting for the opportunity for its evil to be expressed as if a chemical equation: base elements metastatically changing into dangerous states, unstable compounds catalysing into paranormal activity. For there is malevolence in this sad, weeping world that knows no cartographer's borders, no politician's gerrymandering, no carbon-dater's research figures. This evil has many names

and this evil cunningly knows that its devotees are best cultivated from a distance.

Thus, Good Reader, it must be known, that even for an olive-skinned, part-Aboriginal child lovingly brought up as a good Catholic Australian, there was never any guarantee against that promising lad encountering - and eventually becoming himself - the most irrevocable and pitiful incarnation of malice, for the suffering of his forebears is a sub-conscious knowledge within his psyche, and the conflict between it and his outwardly civilised, White Man ways must eventually erupt, like the lancing of a suppurating carbuncle.

Lo and verily, Good Reader, whilst growing up as an impressionable youngster that troubled part-Aboriginal boy might read the Holy Bible studiously and go to Sunday Mass dutifully at the local country church in the outback of Queensland, where, with well-rehearsed guile, he lisps through missing front teeth a tactfully abridged confession re his schoolyard crimes to the bored, local priesthood.

The cloistered White Man would retire later that evening, guiltily masturbate in the non-seeing silence of his lonely quarters (trying not to think of little boys), imbibe a little too much Chateau Tanunda, and wonder if his life was being well-lived, ministering as he did to the Aboriginal fringe-dwellers that he deluded himself into thinking were as obedient as a flock of pure white Merino sheep.

Lo and verily, Good Reader, whilst growing up into a teenager that callow part-Aboriginal youth might pray to a selection of we gods come annual exam time, anxious to win that scholarship and get out of that small outback town and into the big smoke of Anywhere.

Lo and verily, Good Reader, whilst seeking guts, glory and girls that fully-grown part-Aboriginal adult might bless himself with the sign of the cross and mumble a quiet entreaty to the Virgin Mary before running out onto the paddock for the desperately important footy finals. For out on the sporting field

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waits magnificence, and the local newspaper photo-journalists capture him, up there like Cazaly, flying, taking the mark.

And, perhaps, Good Reader, if that part-Aboriginal adult graduates and marries and eventually becomes the doting father at the head of a table of laughing children and gurgling grandchildren, then lo, that boy slash man might say a heartfelt grace for the bounty of good tucker and good family. And despite the lower life expectancy of most Aboriginal Australians in this Lucky Country, this was a dream many black and nearly black boys aspired to, even if the bottle waylaid their plans half the time.

Certainly, there are hardly any well-meaning Catholic Aboriginal boys who make it to that last contented stage of life. There are so many delectable temptations for the too weak flesh along the way. Associated with these enticements are powerful chthonic, super-natural forces against which eternal vigilance must be maintained if one hopes to earn the salvation of the eternal soul. For many Australian Catholic boys, Aboriginal or otherwise, the Anti-Christ was, is, and always will be the ultimately malignant temptress - a wily, sex-charged femme fatale - but we gods know all that, and we can forgive all of that, too.

For what matters most is whether that boy willingly permits the Angel Satan (in whatever guise that child understands him) to take his soul when he finally dies or whether he seeks the love, forgiveness and the grace of his Messiah (in whatever guise that child understands him) - even in the very hour he knows his demise is imminent. As the white-whiskered Elders of the tribe will tell him, in that final moment of compunction, a lifetime of fuck-ups can be absolved.

“For all of us mortal humans ...,” the middle-aged, part-Aboriginal boy slash man named Sterling de Bortoli intoned to himself as he aimed the syringe loaded with the anabolic steroid Sustanon 250 at his bare muscular backside in the after hours campus toilet (his makeshift altar, if ye will, to the corporal

functions of bodybuilding, a sport in which contestants strive for the hardest physique and, ironically, the darkest skin colour possible).

He continued his homily with a truism; “For all of us, life is fleeting. A random number of too-short days wrestled from eternity.”

As it is with most of those bound by soul and intellect to the Catholic Church, his was an existence obsessed with the body. The Crucifix and its proud display of Jesus’ broken carcass, the trans-substantiation of the host, and the morbid guilt of sexuality, these were some of the fixations that preoccupied the troubled mind of de Bortoli.

He offered up his miseries to his unique version of God and crooned softly: “For every single mortal one of us, the sinister Goddess of Death looms unfailingly, and one must always be concerned with whatever sins one has committed - and the repercussions such acts might have - come the dark, dark day of Judgement.”

De Bortoli paused. He genuflected. He thought, as usual, a little more than was necessary for an urban misfit such as he, one who was living a near-subterranean and necessarily secret existence on the University of Melbourne grounds where he was enrolled for a seemingly impossible doctorate.

“And, of course, what matters is whether, at that final lonely moment, any real remorse is felt,” he declaimed confidently to his audience of what he incorrectly assumed was none. De Bortoli often spoke out loud when weighing up matters of religion, as if practising a quasi-legal defence for his mortal misdemeanours at his imaginative conception of Heaven’s reception desk.

“Indeed,” he continued, “The Catholic faith excuses ... Yes, it actually condones ... the most egregious, the most heinous of sins. For as long as one repents - even as late as on one’s deathbed - one can know that our most gracious God will cut the repenting sinner some Heavenly Slack. Thus we Catholic boys who are becoming Catholic men are capable of the most unspeakable acts of iniquity, aware as we are of this generous loophole.”

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Know ye, Good Reader, that the boy slash man convincing himself of this story is a former Catholic altar boy. Yet, unbeknownst to the priests, his baptism had never taken place as claimed and, furthermore, he was the bastard son of a part-Aboriginal woman from the long grass of Mt. Isa and an alcoholic, Italian immigrant father. He was an Octoroon who looked neither black nor white, and who lived a far from untroubled life as he vainly tried to straddle both worlds.

His mother was the granddaughter of an unknown bush Blackfella whose name was never recorded and, like her son, her baptism had been overlooked. She was an illegitimate 'quarter-breed', according to those humans who would claim to specialise in such matters. Hence de Bortoli was a miscreant of the very finest cultivation indeed, according to others.

There were otherworldly entities aplenty watching him quite closely, like a transcendent panel of jurists.

Unaware of we divine onlookers or even my own omniscient commentary, de Bortoli concluded his monologue and, with a grimace, sank the needle deep into his powerful Gluteus maximus. Gritting his teeth, he then depressed the plunger, sending the oily suspension quickly, productively into the thick muscle of his arse.

He had a roguish, wide-shouldered look about him for he was a former professional footballer but was now a greying, raging bull yearning for academic acceptance, while still clinging determinedly to the hedonistic lifestyle of his collapsed youth. In his middle-age now, general practitioners of medicine prescribed him testosterone-based anabolic steroids to supplement his own naturally diminishing endogenous hormonal output, as they did for many middle-aged men such as he across the nation. And yet de Bortoli was about to have his middle-aged, chemically bolstered world turned completely inside out.

Now, Good Reader, let it be known that we in the empyrean jury are only too aware that de Bortoli had moments of spiritual doubt but he was still, as far as we could tell, a most-times Catholic. And being born out of wedlock, as he

was, by a mother herself born out of wedlock, the unbaptised boy slash man of this story was always destined to be a person of interest to the followers of the Anti-Christ.

Thus, the many powers aligned against Catholic Christianity were very interested in this particular Aboriginal Australian - the self-proclaimed Angry Troll of Melbourne University - who was about to become an actor in a play as old as humanity itself.

Lo and verily, Good Reader, a wine-dark droplet of blood slowly oozed from the puncture wound on his buttock. De Bortoli didn't notice, of course. But it did not go unnoticed by the afore-mentioned astral entities who were closely observing him, surveying him, and yes, some were actually measuring him.

Supernatural lips were licked.

And accordingly, I, who am just one of so very many of we gods with teeth, stretch open my voluminous maw, taste the brand new night air with my glistening, flickering tongue-yawn, and his wretched little narrative commences.

Or does it? De Bortoli was a most creative academic and a writer with a rampant, out of control imagination, a man for whom truth and fiction live mobile lives on an ever-changing continuum. Hence, confirming the veracity of this tale is a task I leave to ye and ye alone, Good but cynical Reader ...

CHAPTER ONE.

“Does anyone really know where the Christ, or the Anti-Christ ... or whoever the fuck is, actually, really, *ultimately* in charge ... where that divine old un bastardo who oversees this shit we call ‘living’ is gonna lead you next? Affunculo! No wonder I need another bloody drink! Why? Why you think? Because this God fella, he is il pistolino of the universe!”

- Sterling de Bortoli’s Italian-born father, Gino, to himself, alone at night on his mountaintop farm some one hundred and eighty kilometres from Canberra, the lonely bush capital of Australia.

Sometimes, upon idle reflection, a man thinks about himself too much and then unhappily concludes that his life has been no more original than a rerun of a Hollywood B-grade movie, with plots as inane and predictable as that which any two-bit drunken hack could churn out on their battered old Remington. Ah, but there's always the ending ... that's yours and yours alone to write. Nevertheless, every unique ending has had an equally unique beginning ... and here is mine.

G'day, friend *Balanda*, how's it going, eh? My name's Sterling de Bortoli and I'm a homeless fella from the Kalkadoon mob up Mt. Isa way. But before you get all judgemental on my cute part-Abo arse, let me tell you this much: life as a homeless down and out on the inner city streets of Melbourne is pretty easy for a bloke of my well-honed ingenuity and who is fortunate enough to have no nagging wife nor bawling kids dependent upon his fortnightly pay packet. Yep, that's good old, lucky old single me. In fact, in some ways, it's a damn sight better, I'll gladly wager, than your typical nine to five job, unna.

Well, that's what I'd tell my good old, lucky old Dad if he ever found out the truth about me. 'No soul-destroying mortgage to pay off and no bosses whose hairy arses demand kissing,' I'd say to my Beloved Pop if he sighed in disappointment. 'No backstabbing so-called colleagues to battle with,' I'd say if my Respected Father shook his head in disgust. 'No snotty-nosed kid's birthdays and violin recitals to apologise for missing,' I'd persist in my defence if the Old Bastard's shoulders slumped for whatever possible reason they might slump. Ah, but then would come my clincher as I reached for the flag I would plant at the apex of my argument: "Dad, regardless of what you think of me, your first-born son, I am an urban hunter and gatherer. My modern-day tools are not the spear, woomera or boomerang but my Blackfella resourcefulness and limitless courage! I am proud to be a 21st Century Aborigine!"

You see, *Balanda*, I believe that I thrive in this, my singularly anarchic lifestyle choice, as a modern day hunter and gatherer. Each council garbage can

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and St. Vinnies clothing bin provides the exciting prospect of a new bounty, and often a new revelation, from or about contemporary *nouveau riche* Melbourne society because, of course, these stupid city people throw out so much of value. Unspoilt food. Still useful furniture. Designer-brand clothing. It's all mine for the minor inconvenience of occasionally being spotted dumpster-diving by sneering passers-by. And let us not forget that there are always the handouts from the welfare professionals and professional bible-thumpers who ply the back-streets of Melbourne with their mobile soup kitchens. A man can get used to day old bread when it's gratis and served with hot beef consommé. And if one is really desperate and hungry, then vacuum-sealed plastic packets of smoked chicken or turkey breast can be smuggled out of the local Woolworths or Coles supermarkets if you stuff them deep into your underwear, and wear your shirt untucked to hide the tell-tale bulge in the groin that is, this time at least, not an erection.

Most importantly, however, is the exquisite reality associated with the incontrovertible fact that even though my Indigenous scholarship has finally run out, I can still be a student *and* get the lovely dole every fortnight by admitting to a kindly doctor (medical doctor, not philosophical, that is) the obvious and self-evident truth that I'm a raging alcoholic. Had my first drink when I was seven. You can blame the church for that. Holy friggin' Communion!

Anyway, the good doc bulkbills the cost of the consultation to Medicare, then writes a medical certificate for another three months and suggests, yet again, that I try attending Alcoholic Anonymous.

His optimism is well-practised but not really that convincing as I've heard it all before and done, well, some of it before. Not the full rehab trip, of course, but I did do an inpatient detox once. Just like a catered hotel it was, but with daily Thiamine injections and heaps of Valium loading to stave off those dreaded DTs. So after a week of that I was clean and sober but they discharged me back onto the streets with a position on a three month waiting list for a bed

in rehab and so what d'ya reckon happened? Yup, a full-blown relapse right back to where I probably belong.

Which is here.

And so Australia's governmental welfare agency known as Centrelink deposits my 'arts grant' payments (as a wanna-be writer that's how I avoid answering any questions about my occupation with the more truthful words 'dole bludger') every fortnight in my bank account, and I am Free. I am Free. I am Free.

I will *always* be Free in this great land of Australia, where I can go walkabout anywhere I like just as long as there's a Centrelink office I can get to every three months or so.

Thus, each morning I wake up to a brand new day: the shiny, unblemished promise of a wealth of possibilities as yet untarnished by time.

Now for those of you *Balanda* readers of this unpretentious yarn who are perhaps lacking frequent flyer points and have never travelled so far, the South Eastern Australian city of Melbourne is often described as one of the most liveable cities in the world. And despite reading the many picturesque travel magazines and brightly coloured, glossy newspaper lift outs I'd find after ransacking the back alleys and effluence of these affluent inner city suburbs, I have never really dreamt, as some restless and cashed-up souls apparently do, of winging myself to far away overseas countries.

Certainly I have never before yearned to visit what was to prove to be ... One Of The Most Inhospitable And Potentially Dangerous, Religion-Dominated Landscapes On Earth!

Such for me were the barren stony shores of North West Africa's sunny Morocco in September 2008 when I had the misfortune of arriving just days before the month long period of Muslim self-denial known as *Ramadan*. It was then and there, in the solar-drenched land of the Moors, that I was destined to finish the first leg of my heuristic journey from dreary Melbourne - via the

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National Capital of Australia (my memory-logged home-town of Canberra) - and prove my worth to my one and only Maria.

Now Maria, ah, yes ... my sweet young Maria - I don't believe there is another soul on Earth quite like her, and it's about time I described her. For starters, she is so perfectly slim, so athletically toned, she could easily earn a living as a model. Her hands are extraordinary - long-fingered, flexible and elegant.

Hair? Let me tell you, this beautiful sylph is blessed with long tresses of black that show only the slightest curl, framing an un-freckled and timelessly beautiful face of pore-less, alabaster complexion. Cheekbones feline, eyes like heavy-lidded almonds, nose an elfin champignon. She is incomparably sexy, Lolita-like, dressed as she most often is in a black, lace-trimmed negligee-like costume.

Oh yeah, she is a Skip, alright. An all-in-black Aussie Skip, through and through, friend *Balanda*, but she's a Skip with a gothic velvet choker wrapped snug around her slender Modigliani neck.

Her ruby-rouged lips flare incandescently against a backdrop of pale, dead-white skin. Those red, red lips appear to be fixed in a permanent half-smile which seem to only reveal her perfectly proportioned teeth when I give forth with a well-practiced joke and then that picture of feminine perfection throws back her head in candid laughter, letting loose her exquisite mane in a slow-motion sequence of sine waves.

It's like a perfect wind has just blown an icy-fresh gust of oxygen into her face, like the exhalation of a lofty god.

Her so, so gorgeous face, smiling as if she had just managed to effortlessly erase all strife in the world and simultaneously elevate human existence to a state of Heavenly Grace, and she beams at me knowingly. She makes me want to collapse into her, to be transported away into the sky, into the sea, into all too foreign lands.

And suddenly, that's exactly what Maria made happen. The all too foreign land of Morocco, to be precise, was where she deemed to transport me.

But until that day in late '08 I was still sleeping rough in good ole Melbourne town, swigging on 'goon', that is, cheap Australian cask wine (also known as 'pinot de cardboard'), and in my resultant alcoholic stupor I'se a dreamin' of finery wis a capital 'F'. I'se on me way to a Channel 9 TV studio. Bein' slowly driven there with th' utmosht decorum by a uniformed chauffeur in a stretch Rolls powered by a hundred superfluous equines, and there was a man in a good toupee - much better than Bert's - an' an even better four button, double breasted bag o' fruit by Zegna 'n he was announcin' into a microphone: "Sterling de Bortoli, THIS IS YOUR LIFE!" and I said wis well-rehearsed but entirely falsh modesty, "No, no, mate, you must be joking!" as I waited for the parade of significant others in my life to tell me jusht how good a man I was. Or had once been. Or perhaps I shoulda been. Or could even shtill be, some glorioush day in the not-so-dishtant future?

I waited for a while, smiling in the midst of these pleasant, swirling fantasies, before my addled mind eventually drifted back, as it inevitably does, to the memory of my teenage hometown. Ah yes, these were the sad moments of sweet inebriation spent hashing over my scarred, seared-black history, but not so vigorously as to disturb the comforting layer of self-delusion, which like a fine dust has settled onto the uneven surface of my personal life story and filled in the ugly pits, pock marks and blemishes like theatrical pancake, smoothing out the ugly complexion of the past. Yes, alcohol worked like heavily applied make-up on reminiscence: it made everything seem like salad days and it airbrushes one's character flaws til it looks to oneself like the porcelain skin of the models on the cover of a women's magazine. Or like the skin of Maria.

But oh, the price to be paid! Withdrawals from cheap wine can be hard: we're talking morning-after-shakes, dry retching and whole body sweats. Very

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tempting it is, sometimes, to partake of a little of that hair of the dog, just to chase away those awful symptoms. To do so, however, will soon see me slide rapidly down to the most slovenly depths of depravity, to my personal rock bottom of all-day drinking, and so instead I usually try to ride that slimy snake through to the evening at least, before picking up a drink again. I prefer to stake out an after-dark position more akin to bedrock, which, to over-extend the mountaineering metaphor, is a pick-hold up from rock-bottom. Snakes and ladders, that's the game I play with booze.

Now, where was I? Ah, yes, my teenage hometown. Such sweet and useful memories have I selectively retained! Perfectly planned Canberra - so detached in appearance and demeanour - had always felt safe for a young, uncertain teenager like I once was. What with its nicely ordered and neatly manicured colleges and universities; its refined art gallery culture and implacable governmental monuments; its easy to rort public transport system; its pampered public servants; its legally enshrined cosmopolitan multiculturalism (and therefore its compulsory multi-theology) and, recently, and perhaps most importantly, to me at least; its status as home to my less than half-my-age girlfriend, Maria.

Ah, Maria. Maria. She, who, in the argot of the youthful University of Melbourne set I now and then frequent (if only on the fringes of acceptance), is what they would call "the dope" or "the bomb" or "a bit of A-grade flange" or even "a total freakin' honey!" If they ever clapped their bulging goggle-eyes on her, that is.

Now, it's most important to understand that the residents of this inland Australian Capital Territory where she and I were separately raised, are a well-educated lot, their Canberran accents not barbed with the nasal twang of Outback Queensland, but rather softened by the slow, deep tones and drawl of the gentler Southern states. The happy people in Canberra prosper as a result of the continual influx of federal funds to support their clerical activities in the

many government departmental office blocks dotted around the city. But their workplaces are no sweatshops: they are air-conditioned palaces meeting OHS-enshrined standards, whose surrounds are dominated by gardener tended lawns, neatly pruned shrubbery and ornamental tree-lined nature strips.

Every suburban street and cul-de-sac in Canberra, it seems, is occupied by public servants or else manned by the people running the service industries that support those government workers, and no-one is perturbed by the proliferation of traffic roundabouts. Similar to the Telecom tower on Black Mountain, gracefully piercing the clouds like a space-aged Greek obelisk, the ‘pubes’ of this apparently sterile city, are upwardly mobile, climbing through the ranks of PSA 7, 8, 9 and higher, until, with a disgustingly generous superannuation payout, they then smugly retire to a beachside mansion in Queensland somewhere and forget all about the miserable Canberra winters. Not for them is the hustle and hectic pace of their more desperate cousin’s lifestyles in either Melbourne or Sydney.

Nestled in the foothills of the cold dark Brindabella mountains, Canberra is also the geographically closest capital city to my elderly father’s sprawling fine-wool Merino sheep farm I call my between semesters home away from Melbourne University and he calls ‘God’s End’. He so named it after the legend of a little-known highwayman, an outlaw from days long gone who allegedly terrorised the highways adjacent to the Tinderry Mountains of the Monaro region. On a clear day these peaks can be seen on the horizon, crushed-plum purple in the distance south of the National Capital. At times these mountains appear to be quite nearby, but in travelling the distance one soon realises it is an annoying deception: undulating, prehistoric folds in the terrain make the journey overly long and arduous, even by the fastest four wheel drive. It takes around two and a half hours to motor from the outskirts of Canberra to the blessed isolation of God’s End.

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When I was fourteen I found a sacred spot in the National Park wilderness adjoining God's End. It's a Dreaming circle of head-high granite boulders where I discovered three ancient spearheads when hunting foxes whose pelts I would sell for pocket money. Whenever I can I return to that place, although it's a hard trek into the rough country surrounding the farm. I lower my swag and sit with my back against the largest of the boulders and slowly let the quietness of the bush exercise its soothing influence on my often over-wrought soul. Here I can detach my mind from the immediacy of the present and allow it to identify with the ancient breathing of the hills, in effect making my own usually urban level of breathing seem excessive. After a few minutes in such repose my city life begins to feel just a little vulgar and pointless. I feel I could hermit myself away there for days, if not years, on end. The place is so serene it seems to underline the immense triviality of humanity. I don't know if any Whitefella would feel the exact same way, but I'm not about to introduce my special Dreaming place to anyone else no matter what, and no-one else is keen on wandering around that out-of-the way wilderness anyway.

The stripling, bearded bushranger I just referred to as the inspiration for the farm's name was accustomed to long horseback rides, however, and the return journey from the distant dirt highways he stalked was nothing, especially if he'd scored a strongbox of valuables. He used to hideout on the farm's tallest peak, enjoying the sweet, astringent mountain air at the juncture twixt night and fresh morn, beneath the seven sisters of the Southern Cross, that famous constellation of stars that hangs tilted and twinkling on its axis, like a broken Crucifix on a backdrop of endless, uncaring black.

He knew a short peace there, until, when cornered by the Queanbeyan mounted police (the oldest such constabulary in NSW, apparently), the handsome young criminal gave up the ghost and slipped into obscure history with a single gunshot. With nowhere left to run he naturally blew his brains out in his wattle and daub shack hidden not quite deep enough amongst the stippled

grey snow gums, mountain swamp gums and moss-covered granite boulders: a scene of exquisite, indescribable desolation. “Faaark!” mourned the murder of crows that also call the place home. The vindictive coppers burnt down his shack with the words, ‘My God’s End, My Godsend!’ the bushranger had painted in molasses with broad, nihilistic strokes above his camp cot, and thus a local legend was born.

Dad, Desmond and I had moved to the new region from outback Queensland when Mum died unexpectedly from a brain aneurism. I was just turned 10 and her death hit me real bad, as you would expect. Unlike my younger brother Des, I was old enough to know that ‘death’ meant she was never coming back. It was pretty sudden and it shook up Dad so much he quit his job in the Mt. Isa mines and he quit the Catholic Church and then he just climbed into his battered old EH Holden ute with me and the bewildered Des bawling our eyes out on the torn vinyl bench seat next to him and he started driving down South. He just quit the Isa. Quit it like a leaking ship dumps its ballast, and then we were like rats, swimming for our lives, not knowing where we would find land.

Dad had lived virtually his whole life in the Isa. Met Mum there: a half or maybe quarter-blood Aboriginal *Kalkadoon*. Gave birth to me there (I was lucky: it was in the Mt. Isa hospital). Went to Catholic Mass there, but not every week, of course. Drank cheap plonk with the other loser Abos in the dry riverbed there (they certainly weren’t fussy about the company they kept). Stood by as Mum had Desmond there (in the meagre shelter of the long grass with the help of a surprisingly sober Aboriginal midwife). Broke his leg in the world-famous Mt. Isa rodeo there and, now, still favoured his left leg when walking, always gingerly like he might do the good one in too at any moment.

He started seriously thinking about making an honest woman out of Mum there (after two bastard kids, no less!). As an adult, he’d only ever been as far away from the Isa as seaside Townsville and that was to make tentative

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enquiries about a proper wedding ceremony on the beach. I reckon it would have been very romantic, with a qualified celebrant and a white laced wedding gown for mum and a rented tuxedo for Dad and all that ceremonial crap. In the early hours, while she gently snored, and he fought his insomnia, Dad planned as he listened to the velvet-pawed nocturnal life outside. External to our Isa bungalow, the soft marsupial stealth of bandicoots contrasted markedly with the disturbing call of the nocturnal Stone Bush curlews (or *Weelow*, according to the *Kalkadoon* lingo). The unmusical song of this bird sounds like the shriek of a madwoman, rising through the high-pitched registers of prehistoric terror and orgasm through to peals of maniacal laughter before it subsides into sobs of desperate keening. It is a heart wrenching noise, much like the amplified hysteria of a refugee, and sounds as if they are mourning for lost or stolen children. The source of these unhappy night sounds are ungainly, grey animals, tall and haughty, and they are often spotted in pairs with their long hard beaks held high, regarding their reflections in the night-time mirror-glass walls of the deserted petrol station buildings on the outskirts of towns.

One wondered how they spent their sun-baking days? Perhaps standing and sleeping bolt-upright in the long dead grass? Is that why they sound so wretched, so tortured? Had anyone ever seen the ‘home, sweet home’ of a curlew’s nest? Could my father Gino de Bortoli ever live in a Mt. Isa curlew’s nest after my mother’s death, without Insanity pounding furiously on the door, demanding entry to his already dishevelled mind?

Whenever I come across a curlew I can’t help it: I stop dead in my tracks and just stare. They’re a bird that just makes no sense to me, a very strange bird indeed, that *Weelow* fella.

But my poor old Mum was dead and buried and that crazy old bird my Dad was driving us all to a new life, whether Des and I liked it or not. He was a wizened old widower with absolutely no plans but to get as far away from anything that reminded him of his late partner and devoted soul mate. For some

reason he drove straight past Brisbane, which Mum used to call *Meanjin* and which forever brings to mind pictures of streets carpeted in mauve Jacaranda blossoms, and then detoured around the fake emerald city of Sydney and suddenly we just stopped in Canberra where he started looking for a block of land to buy. It might have been the fiercely frost-bitten cold of the place that attracted him, being nothing like the Isa's dry, incessantly baking heat that barely relented for what passed as winter in that part of North Queensland. In Canberra, thanks to its altitude, winter is a long, drawn out, imprisoning affair. Hell, sometimes there's snow in sheltered gullies on the high slopes of the Brindabellas that never actually melted until late spring! Months and months on end have to be endured before this, the coldest region in the country, swings into a cruel, burnt-out summer. The seasonal extremes of razor-sharp chilled winds, killer frosts, debilitating droughts and all-exterminating bushfires, that's Canberra, eh.

Or it might have been the rowdy Aboriginal demonstration that was making history in the street opposite Old Parliament House when we drove into the so-called Bush Capital on our very first day there in 1972.

Yep, it was a full-on banner-waving demo and I'd never seen anything like it. There were Blackfellas protesting in their thousands - and even a few *Balanda* demonstrating in admirable solidarity - and the lousy pigs were laying into them all with their lousy pig truncheons left, right and centre.

I saw the famous activist Chicka Dixon himself, with a megaphone in hand, whipping up the crowd. Most Aboriginal fellas weren't in on the anti-Vietnam war demos but they - well, we - were realising the relevance of America's Black Power riots and so there was my brother from another mother making himself heard.

These Aboriginal men and women were brave enough to dream of a similar revolution in human rights happening Down Under, too. It was the fantastic, heady, hippy days of the 70s, after all, and there were what seemed

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like a million dark fists pounding the sky or raised in defiance at the government condoned prejudices that prevented land right claims and recognition of prior ownership.

Now, Dad wasn't *Murri* like Mum (he was a greasy-skinned, bow-legged little man of Italian descent with curly black hair and an olive complexion whose folks brought him over to Ingham as a young tacker to where my Italian Granddad Nino was working the cane fields, alongside many other post-war Italian immigrants), but Mum sure was *Murri*. Well, part *Murri*, at least: no one actually knew who her father was, but her mother was definitely a *Kalkadoon*. The briefest of records show that she was taken to a Catholic mission as a four year old. She was one of the 'Stolen Generations'. They takem to big school. Gonna be taught proper Whitefella way, eh? Learn all 'bout Jesus, eh? That's how I imagine my grandmother's introduction to the White Australia Policy began.

By the way, ta very much, Prime Minister Mr. Rudd. Apology accepted, although long overdue. And you can go to Hell, Messrs Windschuttle and Bolt. You lousy Stolen Generation deniers. Sceptics. Liars. Revisionists. You Goddamn Whitefella racists.

Although her white father is unidentified in any records, Mum was generally known to be a half-caste. So that makes me a Mestee, I guess. A Mestizo. A 'Creamie' as film-maker Baz Luhrmann inventively defines us in his epic comedy film modestly entitled *Australia*. Or an Octoroon, actually, coz probably only my great gran was a full-blood.

One eighth Abo-digenous! One eighth of the proudest tribe in Queensland whose descendants consider the war against the British invaders to be ongoing and as yet unsettled. Never has there been a treaty! Never has there been any surrender! Sovereignty of this land remains contested so go back to where ya come from, Captain bloody Cook and all youse bloody convicts that followed him!

Unlike the savvy Maoris of New Zealand or the gullible North American Indians, no official agreement has ever been reached. Genocidal massacres of the Indigenous *Kalkadoons* and other Blackfellas aplenty, however. But enough of our mob has survived and we have technically never given in to the invading European. Yup, that's probably you, *Balanda*, although there are plenty Blackfellas will call me *Balanda*, given my ambiguous skin-tone, until I explain the details of my Aboriginal lineage.

Because you are what you say you are and who cares what name any other bastard calls you. You either recognise your connection to this land, by blood, or you don't. The actual percentage of ancestry has gotta be irrelevant, right? I mean, there's no scientific tipping point at which you change from being Indigenous to being non-Indigenous.

But had I been born a generation or two earlier, I know I would have been considered a prime candidate for forced integration into the socially engineered society aiming for a 'White Australia'. Assimilated. Not being very black, I would have been 'Stolen' and they would have forced me to be more 'White'. Like my Mum had. Never being taught about her Grandfather's Dreaming. Our Dreaming. The Aboriginal Australian spirituality.

Never knowing where she belonged.

Like me today.

I have 'olive' skin, they say. I have curly, dark brown hair. They don't have to say that: it's pretty bloody obvious. My hard, protruding brow juts out over my brown eyes like the overhang of a cliff and my flat nose ain't no perky lil' ski-lift affair either: it's spread out across half my damn face. No denying these facts that cover me like a tailor-made government issue blanket emblazoned with the initials SDB.

But still, cos I'm not 'black', people in bureaucracy ask *terribly* important fucking questions about who I *think* I am. What I *identify* as.

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Too much Whitey to be a fair dinkum Aborigine, perhaps, too much Aborigine to be a true blue Whitey.

But what colour, Mr. *Balanda*, is an Octoroon's heart?

Of course, nobody at my new school in Canberra knew anything about all that and everyone just assumed I was a greasy Wog from somewhere near the Mediterranean sea because I had curly brown hair and an olive complexion like my Eye-tie Dad, Gino, and I was therefore always copping it from my peers. The ethnic sounding surname capped it all off so I got constant racial abuse - it was the ignorant 70s, after all.

Some thoughtful mentors of children will ruminate on how schooling constructs sound character, by chipping off the edges, and the hardships of a new school would qualify as such. My edges were smoothed, granted, but removing the roughness revealed no diamond of character, only shapelessness, like an unintelligible sculpture in a modern art exhibit, and I was roundly mocked by my school cronies.

But the abuse would have been even nastier if the kids worked out that I was actually part Abo, the dirty, bastard whelp of a dirty, treacherous Gin. Such verbal maltreatment would have tempted me irresistibly to point a magic bone at them and turn them into legless tadpoles.

That was a joke, *Balanda*, I ain't no *Kadaicha* witch doctor!

So I kinda understand why the demonstrations in Canberra and the subsequent establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the lawns opposite Parliament House made such an impression on my Dad. There weren't many things he took a stance on but racism was one. He himself grew up being called just about every racist name under the blazin' Aussie sun: 'Dago', 'Wog' and 'Eye-tie' were the most common. But never, ever 'Skippy'. Oh, no, coz 'Skips' are the blessed white Anglo-Saxon Aussies. Bloody oath, mate, those proud Aussies can trace their roots back to convict ancestors transported from England as punishment for their criminal misdemeanours. Woo hoo! Such noble

pedigrees! But do they feel so superior when the doctors proclaim their skin cancers on their pink-skinned shoulders to be malignant?

And of course old Dad himself had gotten a double dose of vitriol when the Isa rednecks learned the woman he was living in sin with was a 'Boong'. 'Coon'. 'Nigger'. 'Dirty Abo'. I thought it didn't get to him, but at ten years of age, well, what did I know? So perhaps that's why, after Mum kicked the bucket, he decided to settle in Canberra when he saw the Aboriginal people protesting so proudly and defiantly near the picture perfect shores of Lake Burley Griffin. Eventually, after a year of working in a quarry across the border near Queanbeyan, in New South Wales but right adjacent to Canberra, Dad found us our big block of land about two hours drive away in the high Tinderry Mountain ranges of the Monaro where Eastern grey kangaroos and brush-tailed rock wallabies provide easy meat, the sheep produce the finest Merino wool in the world and the fat Bogong moths swarm in their millions every spring into early aestivality.

Bogong. Boong. G, not much difference, eh, *Balanda*?

Now let me fill you in, you see, a knowledge of Bogong moths is important for Aboriginal Australians in the Monaro region and although they were entirely different *Murris* to my Mum's *Kalkadoon* mob, I learnt about Canberra's *Waradjuri* people who used to join up with tribes from the North East and Upper Murray river regions, after meeting with and gaining permission from the local *Yiatmathang* people, to feast on the protein-rich Bogong moths resting unawares in the high alpine plains south of Canberra.

Needless to say, cooking the little buggers is an art. Eating insects is what birds are reduced to and we are people so we gotta cook 'em and we gotta cook 'em right. Because even Aboriginal people get tired of kangaroo meat and wild turnips every time dinner rolls around. The eventually tasty, high calorie insects wedge themselves in nooks and crannies between the rocks and boulders on the high open plains, in numbers such that they look like vast layers of fuzzy brown

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fungus, pulsing gently with their measured insect breaths. They were considered well worth the long trek from Canberra or from even further afield.

Other bush tucker you can comfortably live off in the Canberra/Monaro area includes the tiny sweet fruits of the Cherry Ballart bush (known to the botanists as *Exocarpus cupressiformis*), which you eat raw, and the cooked tubers of the *Murnong* yam (*Microseris scapigera*), easily identified by its bright yellow daisy-like flowers or the *Njamang* yam (*Bulbine bulbosa*), which has long, fleshy leaves and delicate little yellow lilies for flowers. Both these totemic yams blossom in summer to autumn on the high mountain ridges and in the sub-Alpine forests of Snow Gums.

Near Canberra you can still find the sacred shapes and silhouettes of wallabies and possums painted on the rock shelter at a place called Yankee Hat in the Namadgi National Park high up in the Brindabella mountains. This region was visited by numerous neighbouring clans, including the *Gundungurra*, *Ngarigo*, *Wolgalu* and *Wiradjuri* mobs. They'd dig up red ochre from a natural quarry near the now-trendy suburb of Red Hill for the artwork they painted on their bodies and they'd grind grooves in the sandstone outcrops there as they sharpened axe heads and the fire-hardened points of digging sticks. Some places were dedicated to grinding wattle seeds for bush damper and the eggheads at CSIRO did radiocarbon dating of charcoal found in these outdoor kitchens which shows Aboriginal occupation of the area since more than 21,000 years ago. But it was mostly a summer hunting ground: even the furriest possum skins were not warm enough for the sub-zero Canberra mornings in winter.

The name 'Canberra' is, of course, just one of numerous Aboriginal words for 'Meeting Place'. There were more than two hundred different Aboriginal dialects before the European invasion wiped most of 'em out. A few years ago, when I briefly returned to Canberra in my thirties, I spent a weekend tending to the sacred fire in the Aboriginal Tent Embassy opposite the Old Parliament House, while the magnificent sulphur-crested white cockatoos

shrieked in the treetops, the black and white magpies warbled and carolled on the ground and the red, yellow and black banners of the Indigenous flag of Australia billowed in the breeze.

Fire is the gateway to Dreaming. It lies at the very root of all Aboriginal culture and connate lore. Smoking ceremonies accompany any important tribal event. The Blackfellas who camp between the ornamental trees in the Parliamentary triangle always claim the sacred fire opposite Old Parliament House has never burnt out since being lit during those first demonstrations in the 70s and the at that-time Keeper of the Flame (who was related to a highly respected and chest-scarred *Wiradjuri* Elder) wanted to take his girlfriend away to the coast for a dirty weekend - sly bugger - so I volunteered to keep the ceremonial 'Sacred Fire of Aboriginal Peace and Justice' stoked. Yeah, and so I painted myself up and I was stoked, too. The whole thing gave me a hard-on, said one young and overly familiar acquaintance of mine back then. But she wasn't really complaining, she lustily assured me ... Ah, to be young again!

Ask any botanist and they'll tell you that many species of *Eucalyptus* trees actually require the heat of a bushfire before their seeds will germinate. A regular occurrence, either through lightning strike or Blackfellas burning off scrub to flush out game, bushfires will storm through valleys, up and over hills, monsterring and rampaging, their Hellish embers floating across waterways to start new Hells. And then, immobile in the fiery maelstrom's unstoppable path, the oil-rich *Eucalyptus* leaves will shrivel and curl before suddenly exploding into deadly fireballs. Our indigenous gum trees, it seems, have evolved to burn and rise again, like veritable Jesus trees.

Many such *Eucalypts* line the shores of Lake Burley Griffin, which, with a good tail wind, is less than a day away from the wilderness of the national parks abutting God's End, into which flocks of up to twenty head of my Dad's polled Hereford cattle - bearing the distinctive de Bortoli brand and lowing triumphantly - would regularly abscond, trailing fencing wire and bended steel

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droppers like streamers of heavy confetti and subsequently followed by countless head of our precious Merinos, which would eventually starve to death in the thick brush, blinded by their own overgrown wool.

The Canberran birds on the wing sealed their hegemony over these non-native intruders with sonic affirmations from up high as they rode the breeze effortlessly: corvids including crows and pied currawongs with their melodious peals of bell-like birdsong, brownish mountain wood ducks in pairs, faithfully mated for life, and regal-looking red-billed black swans; all hitched rides with the mid-altitude air currents to wherever they sought new pastures. But many, like the life-long employees of the Public Service, saw no reason to ever leave Canberra, and birdlife swells in abundance, here, by the Aboriginal Tent Embassy opposite Old Parliament House, the centre-piece of Australia's seemingly omnipotent white rule, and the skies hum and haw with a hundred different avian calls while the streets hum and honk with a hundred different models of new car.

Marred only by the noisy 5.30 am departures of the tourism-driven "Balloons Afloat" launches from the adjoining park, my time at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy site was blissfully serene and yet considerably educational. During that fascinating weekend spent tending the sacred fire I was told some more stories of the Dreamtime and was surprised to hear that the grey whiskered old Aboriginal storyteller, Auntie Carol, had no problem believing in both the *Murri* view of creation and a Catholic Christian point of view.

But then she told me of the toothless *Yara-ma-yha-who*, a child sized, red-skinned monster with suckers on its fingers and a body composed almost entirely of stomach and head.

This monster preys on naughty children, or even adults who had been naughty as children, and feeds like a housefly, periodically regurgitating its victim in a sticky mess of stomach acids. But its blood-sucking attacks can be survived if the victim feigns death: more frightening is the *Mrart*, a fiercely

fanged monster that terrorises Blackfella campsites at night, whisking its victims away forever.

These are gods to be feared, unlike Jesus, she explained didactically. Her silvery grey afro seemed to vibrate as if charged with electricity, and she laughed at my surprised reaction to her serene multi-theology.

I guess I am a bit the same with my ambivalent take on Aboriginal spirituality and identity, really. Sometimes I will tick boxes on government applications for financial aid or on university survey forms to identify myself as Indigenous but sometimes I don't. I'm not actually black and I'm not actually white and what the Hell does olive mean anyway? Skin colour just doesn't seem that important to me - unless, of course, there is some money in it ... so I tend to dance around those Blackfella questions most of the time.

Then Auntie Carol told me, as if this information was easily hers for the telling, that my Dreamtime totem was the *Garrawi* cockatoo, that big yellow-crested white parrot that looks so beautiful and proud but sounds like a screeching banshee. "That bird, *Garrawi*," she said with deadly seriousness, "He be there for you always. Mebbe, you not see him. Mebbe, you not hear him. But that bird your brother. An' you can be happy, like that fella cockatoo, jus' flyin' 'round. See that one?" I looked in the direction she was pointing and sure enough, a sulphur crested white cockatoo was swinging upside down from a telegraph line, like a spot-lit circus acrobat, obviously cavorting for the sheer fun of it. Then, as I watched, it seemed to lose its grip and tumbled a metre or two, before spreading its wings and flapping off, squawking like a child with a new vuvuzela.

Auntie Carol continued, "That bird not black, but sure 'nuff, that bird a Blackfella bird. That *Garrawi* bird your totem bird, Sterling."

On the subject of words of wisdom, my old man often used to say to me sagely, as I grubbed out serrated tussock at God's End like some kind of teenage indentured slave, and while the wedge-tailed eagles circled above and

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the yellow-bellied black snakes evaded my mattock: “One day, Sterling, all this will be yours. You’ll be the landed gentry, you will, my boy.” But his sagacity was utterly irrelevant for he’s vigorously engaged in longevity and still going strong at 87 years young. So I got the government funding called Abstudy to pay my way through my undergraduate studies when I ticked that box and nobody asked me about my ancestry when I scored the game winning goal on the footy field despite the fact I wasn’t quite black and I wasn’t quite white and all that mattered was whether or not I could hold my head high as a man and life was pretty damn good when I was a young-un and I was not Shame.

But around a couple of decades later, almost inexplicably, I was thinking of leaving this familiar territory for an extremely unsafe foreign geography on the absolute other side of the world.

A place where my totem bird *Garrawi* had never flown.

It was all quite weird and Un-worldly. Dreamtime-unworldly? Nooo ... A bit different. In fact, quite a bit different from my people’s Dreamtime.

But if you pay close attention, friend *Balanda*, I will try to explain.

CHAPTER TWO.

“She then rose and dried her eyes, and taking a Crucifix from her neck offered it to me. I did not know what to do, for, as an English Churchman, I have been taught to regard such things as in some measure idolatrous ...”

- Jonathan Harker, a somewhat uncertain Protestant on his first journey to Transylvania, and on his way to becoming a Catholic, in Bram Stoker’s world-famous novel, *Dracula*, a work that has never been out of print since first published in 1897.

It is nearing the end of mid-semester break at Melbourne University, which has almost no runic history or even a secret logbook of mysteries unsolved - unlike say, Oxford, Cambridge or Harvard. I've been lazily sojourning in Canberra for a couple of weeks. Spent some time up at God's End until I tired of the thankless, concentration camp-styled labour that Dad put me to. Of course, I've been injecting testosterone fortnightly and am training OK. Maybe 6 outa 10. Not great, personal best-type weightlifting but still considerably better than anyone else I know of in my (middle-aged to downright old) age bracket. But most importantly, my Australian passport is in order, my economy class seat is confirmed and I am now at last on my way to North Africa on an audacious and hopefully auspicious expedition, a passage into the great unknown, a journey tainted with a sense of anxious trepidation tempered only by the subconscious knowledge that the itinerary is always to be subject to Maria's subtle manipulation (but more on that later).

After leaving the gentle caresses from my charming little goth girlfriend and the rigours of the old man's farm and the soft cushiness of Canberra and all that they call Down Under, my initial port of call after a gruelling twelve non-stop hours in the air (during which I squinted with difficulty at the three incredibly banal in-flight movies displayed on one incredibly small screen fixed into the back of the seat before me), is the un-glamorous stop-over of Baargghhh-rain. (Apparently you have to pronounce it as if coughing up a lung-full of smoke-tinged phlegm). This short pause for refuelling of the Gulf Air aeroplane is supposed to be rejuvenating for we passengers too, but for me it simply provides the first inkling of the bizarre culture shock that is to come my way, uninvited, in a less than subtle attempt (I assume with unbridled paranoia), to 'en-Gulf' me.

I must endure a ninety-minute hiatus in Bahrain before the connecting flight to Casablanca and the United Arab Emirates airport waiting room seems to be teeming with bearded Sheiks of various shapes and sizes. They are as alike as a population of pondwater micro-organisms wriggling on a scientist's slide

that has been slid scientifically beneath a microscope's viewfinder, I think to myself, with no small degree of condescension. Unlike the usual protozoa and amoebae, however, all these foreign lifeforms are clad in identical ivory-white *Gandooras* and all, it seems, are gesticulating widely and wildly to each other. As the oil-rich scholars of the *Koran* around me stroke their oily black or grey facial hair I watch carefully, trying on for size the anonymising cloak of the seasoned traveller.

It does not quite fit.

And so I stare wide-eyed as two Sheiks dressed in pure white, religiously significant suits of cotton and polyester body armour board the 'Casa'-bound plane, each lugging a wooden rack upon which perch four leather-masked falcons. They are huge birds, the dimensions of a Christmas turkey, and look like pernicious bats only they are sitting bolt upright. With their curved claws as sharp and intimidating as razors, they grip the stand as if with steel pliers, and I watch mesmerised and appalled but, I must confess, utterly enthralled. I half-smile as I imagine the suffering of the poor hares and rabbits those honed talons would lacerate as the rodents tried to run, unsuccessfully, for their lives. Don't much like bloody rodents. Unless they're properly cooked, that is. Mmm, underground chicken ...

The cool-as-executioners airline staff raise none of their manicured eyebrows at the sight. Unbelievably, they are actually going to let eight of these ferocious predators of the sky aboard with me. Uncaged. The killer birds are uncaged too.

Apparently there is a hunting tournament coming up near Casablanca and the two Sheiks are off to pay, play and prey. And the religious zealots will certainly pray, too, to their bearded god, the one they call Allah.

Their glistening birds of the hunt are securely perched on the wooden rails at their handler's sandaled feet and they watch with rigidly avian ears only. The owners, of course, are hardened blood sportsters from the Gulf and the

shrouded men calmly munch through their Gulf Air halal meals unfazed. Meanwhile the winged raptors, blinded by tailor-made double-stitched leather caps with trailing leather jesses, smell the micro-waved food and probably query the olfactory sensation.

Sense the air pressure change in the cabin and probably experience a popping sound in their reptile-like ears with wonder.

Feel the roar of the engines and probably start with alarm, momentarily trying to spread wide their usually trusty wings.

Then, perhaps, they might query the shudder of turbulence when the giant metal bird holding them in its entrails drops for a few seconds and they then probably grip their talons tighter as a shadow of fear clouds their tiny brains.

But their dinosaur instincts tell them - not probably but definitively - to sleep, simply because, hey, birdbrain ... it's dark.

Instinct - more powerful than any human tradition or cultural imperative - rules the minds of these feathered predators and they can not waver from their genetically determined behaviour. The temporarily sightless hunting birds deep in the belly of the great silver steel Gulf Air bird cutting through the cloudy blue towards Casablanca at 10,000 metres remain motionless and seemingly unperturbed.

I sure have some catching up to do.

Willing myself to relax I breathe deeply and slowly. I deliberately flex in turn my *Quadriceps femori* (the muscles of my thighs), my *Latissimus dorsi* (in my back) and then my *Pectoralis major* muscles (the chest). Clicking bones and stretching tendons, I thus gain some sensory satisfaction from the knowledge that despite my advanced age I am still fairly strong and fit. Some who're easily impressed might even say 'buffed'. Shunning the usual social circles, pickup bars and nightclubs, I'd spent many a solitary evening pumping iron in the footy club gym and the results help to define my self-image and sense of identity even into my current middle age. And although the depressing grey of said middle age is advancing upon me and I no longer consider myself impressively ripped,

I am not yet slow of limb and I suspect the lingering result of my football-playing years and ongoing weight-training is one of the reasons the gorgeous young Maria finds me attractive ... Ah, Maria (♪ Say it soft and it's almost like praying ♪).

Reassured, I recline the seat to its most horizontal position, eliciting a grunt of displeasure from the passenger seated immediately behind me. Not that I could care one iota less.

Watching from my near supine position I admire the veiled and unwaveringly smiling faces of the slim, polyglot airhostesses before reflecting once again on the fundamental differences between my fellow passengers and I. They are apparently all devout followers of Islam and yours truly, Sterling de Bortoli, is their declared (if not necessarily recognised) arch enemy: an Infidel.

And not just a hated Australian Christian aligned, via our nation's political relationships, with the US and its so-called War Against Terror - the 21st Century Crusade against radical Islam - but an at most times good Catholic boy, although there are some days, weeks and yes, even months on end when I have doubts. So, I am an almost Atheist.

Or is that just an Agnostic? I mean, Darwin's experiences over his many years voyaging and measuring the natural world aboard *The Beagle* produced theories which make a lot of sense to me and therefore generate much internal acedia. That belief probably makes me a double Infidel and I can almost hear the chant as if the Sheiks around me have taken up a deadly chorus:

INFIDEL! INFIDEL!

DIE! DIE! DIE!

INFIDEL! INFIDEL!

DIE! DIE! DIE!

And so on and so on to its inevitably bloody conclusion, I guess. Blah, blah, blah ... I just don't want to know about it.

You wanna fight another war over your stupid Koran and our stupid Bible? Then bring it on, you religious tossers! Coz, hey, I'm too old to be conscripted!

But when my scepticism about all that mumbo-jumbo-whatsit about religion and the Heavenly hereafter wanes, as it inevitably does, and when my jobless times become tough, and when I wonder what my life has amounted to, it is my usual practice to take faith in the Catholic Church of my early childhood. Then will you find me humbly kneeling before Our Blessed Virgin Mary in genuine supplication.

If nothing else she fills the void left by my mother, the university counsellor once said to me, after un-steepling her long tranquil fingers and then tapping her pen knowingly on her melamine desk during our first confidential session. "Student Mental Health Services on campus are free, and that's great, but you only get what you pay for, eh." I responded, with the better half of a sinister smirk sitting smugly on my lips. She didn't appreciate my attitude that much and I guess she had some difficulty restraining herself from writing something along the lines of: "Memo to Director: This client must be section nined for his own protection and the good of the community." Instead, she just smiled wanly, that fall-back look of professional concern on her welfare face as I rolled my eyes at her incompetence and impotent ineptitude.

So, sure, in Melbourne, as a graduate student with a lapsed scholarship getting occasional counselling from professional carers, I am unquestionably poor, but the dole keeps me fed and clothed and all I have to do is read widely and write my brilliant exegesis and then some day modestly accept my award of a PhD from the exalted University of Melbourne, that sandstone and ivy institution nestled safely there in its cosseted courtyards and pseudo-gothic arches in downtown Parkville, Victoria, Australia.

And yet I jumped with surprising enthusiasm when the Catholic reject and firebrand young Maria offered me the unusual prize of – I can still hardly believe it! - a guided camel tour starting from Essaouira (which apparently is a

small town of about 45,000 Moroccans and nearly as many rich French tourists, too stupid to know they are being mercilessly ripped off - much to the benefit of the local Arabian pedlars - in Eastern Morocco's coastal region), across the snow streaked mantle and serrated ridges of the Atlas mountains to the very edge of North West Africa's awe-inspiring Sahara desert. A trip of a lifetime, she unnecessarily assured me.

She'd won the odd trophy, Maria told me, in a national amateur modelling competition a few weeks before we'd even met. No, not that kind of modelling! Not *Picture* or *People* or even *Zoo*. Something to do with diluted emo fashion ... I don't know the precise details ... and I somehow couldn't care and certainly couldn't resist. She made it sound so exciting, so enticing and even, well ... so necessary.

Indeed, I was just about frothing at the mouth, so gee-ed up I was at the exhilarating but unexpected opportunity. Before even checking out my leave of absence options from the university, I'd met and consulted with the local discount travel agency. My philosophy was and always will be that change is inevitable and rather than fear it and in order to get on with one's sadly short life I believe one must always enthusiastically embrace said change, without asking too many stupid questions, eh.

So for a while there I was in a constantly nervous state of expectation. Visions of the actor Peter O'Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia* coursed through my brain and I was known to yell in the days before my departure - quite inappropriately given my age and expected maturity - the catch cry "No prisoners! No prisoners!" Of course, no one except Maria could possibly have understood the powerful claim these images had on my imagination, as they swam the sea of my grey matter like mermaids around treacherous rocks.

OK, but let's face the facts. Although she knows me better than anyone, Maria is my not quite twenty one year old university student girlfriend who never makes me feel middle-aged: even though she steadfastly says she can't

yet sleep with me and couldn't take the holiday to Morocco herself due to something she calls "family reasons."

She can be frustratingly elusive with explanations when she chooses to and I have several times advised her to change her course preferences from botany to studying psychology, or better still, politics.

So, there you have it. That's my girl, the strictly non-Catholic goth chick who always wears a pentagram. "Just for shock value," she says with a wicked smirk. Either that or a tiny messiah on his cross swinging disoriented and upside down between her succulent breasts. Shock value again, I guess. She apparently never goes to Sunday Mass because: "It just gives Mummy and Daddy a smug sense of control over their only widdle daughter." On such hot-weather Sabbaths we'd loll about with our books in her bed-sitter, prostrate in front of an open refrigerator, blatantly wasting electricity, and there, in such decadent repose, she once lectured me on the correct rendition of the Lord's Prayer; "Our Father, who *wert* in Heaven'. She commenced arguing that Satan - as it says in the Book of Isaiah - was the true Father, that Christ's rule was only temporary, and that one glorious day we'd look back on this era as a fascinating aberration of divinity, but ultimately, nothing more than a cul-de-sac in the highway of human spirituality and righteousness. But I thought she was just kidding me.

Lying with her there on the bohemian floor, I peeled off my reading glasses, rubbed the corners of my eyes clean and then did the same to my spectacle lenses. Finally I worked up the courage to force the question past my reluctant teeth and out of my hesitant mouth: "Do you think I should meet your parents?" Her face blanched instantly, going even whiter than her usually ashen complexion, and she dismissed right away any such insane suggestions. Truth be known, I was kinda thankful for that, for the fact is, after all my 40-something years on Earth I am still just a lowly student - albeit a credentialed and seriously published student - but I am one nevertheless unlikely to impress any overly protective parents of an only daughter who was vulnerable enough to probably be corrupted forever by a dead-set loser such as me.

A dead-set loser who was usually lost in his own ennui and was more than twice her age, at that.

But unlike me, Maria had only just finished her third year of a science degree at the Australian National University in Canberra and was well and truly fatigued. She was starting her honours thesis year and really needed the break to recuperate before commencing the research program planned for her fourth and final year, so a trip to the other side of the world was out of the question. Strewth, the poor little thing couldn't even get up in the daytime; she was so completely and utterly buggered from her late night swotting.

Maria is intending to finish her major in botany at the Australian National University and foresees a lucrative future in genetic engineering and the patenting of new herbs, whereas I am a PhD student of media and cultural studies at the miserably friendless Melbourne University who had first met her late in the evening after presenting my paper at a conference at ANU several semesters ago.

My presentation was a trite discussion on the significance of the Crucifix in the generic Vampire movie, that is, the many screen versions of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, a book that has never been out of print since its debut in 1897, a novel that was to far exceed any of its modest Irish author's dreams of literary destiny and immortality.

The day of the conference was a day of striking weather in Canberra, it had been raining so hard, the corrugated iron roofs of the older suburban houses were streaming like pub urinals and from a distance the deluge seemed as solid as sheet metal. Angry streaks of electricity racked the sky and more than one *Eucalyptus* tree was ripped asunder by killer lightning as the wind made them bow obsequiously to their plant gods, the same ones that could uproot the solid oaks as easily as carrots, if they so desired. It was a day fit for naught but indoor adventures of the cerebral kind.

As it happened, that very evening I encountered my own destiny at the university colloquium. For the fickle Goddess of Fate had reserved for me the ostensibly chance encounter with the beautiful young woman of my (embarrassingly wet teenage) dreams. A woman with warm flesh and hot, coursing blood and one who was to prove equally warm against my sweat-stained flannelette shirt when the thermometer plunged and whose direction in life I was set to forever follow, like a slaving hound chasing an irresistible scent.

In the process of only a few hours we each came to know that we belonged to one another, not for one fleeting occasion, but for all our lives. Nay, for all eternity, even. I was suddenly cured of all melancholy, all cynicism, and so, miraculously, was the crap-tastic world around me also cured.

Her proposed thesis would be titled “The Unheimlich Garlic and its blessed blossoms and blooms”, she told me. I had no idea you were vying for the Crap PhD Title Olympics, I goaded good-naturedly, but then she explained a motivation I could easily relate to. Maria explained that few of the words in the title of her thesis had French equivalents and it was just one little way to mess with the Gallic poseurs who had forced the obfuscating work of Derrida et al upon us.

“Nice”, I said, with sincere appreciation. “I hate reading those pompous French deconstructionists.”

And what a light-headed, lightning-fast courtship it was, as I now struggle to recall any of the gallant witticisms I must surely have used to win Maria over. How else could I have done it? Not by sex appeal alone, that’s for sure. But I certainly remember that sex-infused half-smile of hers and the way her black locks flew back so lustily and suddenly when something I’d half expected to sound quite dull came out as inspired and germane. And she was so voluptuous, so enthralling, so captivating. So, so ... So Goddamn Everything!

Nevertheless, at that stage we two were both just very hard-working tertiary students in the highest ranked research universities for our respective

disciplines in the country. Two students who just happened to instantly like each other very much indeed. It happens often enough if you believe the magazines one finds in dentist's waiting rooms, but in real life it was nothing less than unremarkable, eh.

Of course, I still have a lot to learn about Maria. The "family reasons" had, I initially suspected, a lot to do with her youth, her Catholic upbringing, and, well ... her so atypical chastity. She joked to me, "The Catholic Church offers its women only two choices: Perpetual Virginity or Perpetual Pregnancy. Are you really ready for rug-rats, Sterling?" Well, she had me there ... But ever since I climbed off Richard Branson's Virgin Blue flight from Canberra before boarding that Bahrain bound Gulf Air jet in Sydney I've been asking myself why I took up this offer alone. I, too, am an unprepared virgin. A virgin at international travel, that is.

Time check: I am reviewing these notes now on December the 20th 2008, back in Melbourne, just a few weeks since the auspicious All Souls' Day when supposedly all the world's good Catholics commemorate their dead, and when certain of said unhappy dead are suspected of returning to Earth intent on wreaking bloody revenge. But such superstitions are little believed, let alone respected, in mostly secular Australia, and the last few days of Christmas (which is more a celebration of materialistic consumerism than the birth of the founder of Christianity, as everyone surely knows) are to be spent back on campus and let me tell you, they're an austere and unfriended episode of study-obsessed days.

My supervisor, Professor Lewis, is probably the closest thing I have to a friend in Melbourne. If his pleasure at meeting me was ever feigned then he's one of the world's great actors: he always seems glad to see me, even if it means yet another heated discussion about my damn near impossible thesis. But his interest in my private life had never been as believable as when I told him about

Maria for the first time. I entered his book-lined office as I had a hundred times before, he offered me the usual cheap instant coffee, and as the kettle began to jump and spit he laid out the mugs embossed with the university crest and a stale opened packet of biscuits. Research students represented a risk in terms of an academic's career hours as so many research students failed to complete or even submit a gradable thesis, and thus the higher quality refreshments were reserved for more influential guests.

The safely tenured Lewis settled his considerable girth into his favourite armchair, the springs of which had long since given out to his weight (I doubt if he has consulted a set of scales for years), and I began telling him all about the girl I had met at the conference I attended in Canberra. I chopped my hands through the air with slow karate-style movements, organising invisible thoughts into nearly visible ideas, and he listened with commendable patience. Finally the good professor nodded wisely, poured another two cups of the bitter, rubbish coffee and said, "Be careful, boy. Women are The Devil Incarnate. But more importantly, I think you need to rewrite chapter five and excise chapter six altogether." I was instantly livid at this outlandish pedagogy and when I left his office twenty minutes later I was still steaming with self-righteous anger.

So although I've been back home from the Kingdom of Morocco for only a few days now and after handing in the latest draft of my thesis, I'm finally on an overnight bus headed from Melbourne back to Canberra, where my beloved Maria awaits patiently for my report and where the people speak friendly English and where Islam does not rule.

I am thinking of paying a visit to the church of St. Francis Xavier in Hall where the blessed Madonna is also waiting for me, patiently and dependably as ever. It's a simple old church, but She doesn't worry that much about style. And she's not caring if I have had lapses or doubts. She's not counting my sins nor even adding up my crimes.

But I did not yet know that before I could kneel before her I was destined to make a return trip to curs'd Morocco.

D. Bruno Starrs.

Compelled as if by some delirious thirst, I will be back in North West Africa before the first semester of the 2009 academic year has even started. What follows next in these disjointed notes are further details about my journeys, not just in geographical and cultural terms but in terms of religious enlightenment and in terms of my sacrifice too, during the short weeks prior to my second coming in the land of Arabs and Allah.

I am going back to Morocco: a land almost devoid of Crucifixes, if you get my drift, *Balanda*.

CHAPTER THREE.

“Harker returns to Transylvania under conditions which are the complete opposite of those of his first trip - instead of being alone, unsure, and Protestant, he is now in a group, experienced, and quasi-Catholic.”

- Kellie Wixson, ‘Dracula: An Anglo-Irish novel’, in *Dracula: The Shade and the Shadow*, Westcliff-on-Sea, UK: Desert Island, 1998: 254.

Hmm, I feel there's something amiss here, that is, there's something absent in my account of those previous events. I think I may have left out some vitally important aspects of the back story so, please humour me, but let's return again to the 4th of September 2008, just days after my 46th birthday, on my maiden voyage to Morocco, when I left behind me a typically long, rain seeped, bitterly cold Canberra winter made tolerable only by the gorgeously warm (if still frustratingly virginal) company of the wonderful young Maria.

"Sterling," she cooed to me so seriously and yet so endearingly, "I can't declare I will never love another - that would be childish and I'm trying so hard to be a fully grown adult - but I can honestly say that right now I love no other mortal man on Earth as deeply and as surely as I love you." She continued in a voice as sincere and inviting as a cool, clear, wellspring of promise with, can you believe it!, an extended quote from Sheridan le Fanu's *Carmilla*, delivered as artfully as any NIDA graduate in full-on audition mode possibly could:

Dearest, your heart is wounded; think me not cruel because I obey the irresistible law of my strength and weakness; if your dear heart is wounded, my wild heart bleeds with yours. In the rapture of my enormous humiliation I live in your warm life, and you shall die - die, sweetly die - into mine. I cannot help it; as I draw near to you, you, in your turn, will draw near to others, and learn the rapture of that cruelty, which yet is love; so, for a while, seek to know no more of me and mine, but trust me with all your loving spirit.

Her performance was stunning, mesmerising. I was stunned. I was mesmerised. She continued in a laughing voice: "So bring me back something nice and, of course, expensive from Morocco, OK, babe?"

Maria's emerald eyes, as green as freshly shelled garden peas, winked seductively at me and I marvelled at the inexplicable, unbreakable hold she had

on my sex. From the very start, it had been her green eyes, set so wide apart and glowing, so darkly translucent, like a pale, blonde lager specially tinted for St. Patrick's Day and held up to the lighted window panes of a postcard-perfect Irish pub. It was her eyes that glowed like exotic polished jade. It was her eyes that made her immediately likeable to me, indeed, so utterly irresistible to me. As I looked at them I realised I was swimming in them, on the verge of drowning in them, and then her eyes changed before me, taking on in turn all the colours of the sea. I kissed her with my eager, part-Aboriginal tongue and she leant her firm breasted white body against mine and noticed my hardness just below the belt. Giggling, her affection enlarged into a touching display of territorialism, a gesture of devotion if not ownership, as she then touched me with her teeth and gave me the sweetest little love-bite, leaving a purple trophy of a bruise on my Octoroon neck for weeks to follow.

I finger the kiss wound from Maria gingerly as the Morocco-bound plane hurtles through the dazzling atmosphere.

And thus I eventually find myself, after short stops in Bahrain and Dubai, arriving alone in famed Casablanca - which looks nothing like the movie.

"Humphrey who?" the Casablancans all ask.

After eventually exiting customs, which did not slow the two reputable falconer's egress at all and where I resist the smart arse urge to state the Wildean "Nothing but my genius to declare", I stumble into the country of heat-stroke and *Gandooras* and decide to buy a frozen orange juice from a dirt-encrusted young boy on the side of the street outside the airport. He starts with alarm when I catch his shifty black eye as he sits there jealously guarding his polystyrene esky full of potential income.

After the artificial cool inside the airport terminal, the heat of daytime Casablanca is like a king-hit to the forehead, a sledgehammer to the scone, a crash-landing to the cerebellum. It's so oppressive that I actually feel for a moment unable to breathe. Before leaving Australia I had exercised my formidable google-fu, the premier martial art of this cyber age, and my

advanced searches on the Internet had told me that at this time of the year temperatures would rarely drop below 30°C during the day in the country that its 32 million Arab and Muslim inhabitants call *Maghreb el-Aqsa*, but I shrug nonchalantly. God's End gets hot, too.

But this Moroccan heat is unreal. This heat is otherworldly. This heat is the real deal that is North West Africa.

The street urchin cringes as I hand over my freshly exchanged coinage for the not quite refreshing enough citrus beverage. I down it in one greedy gulp and soon feel lights swirling in my head, a strange giddiness between my temples, and I figure it's either the mother of all brain freezes from the slushy iced orange or else my exposure to the novel African microbiology has begun.

Feeling a wee bit hazy.

My thoughts becoming progressively imprecise and tangential.

Things that should not ambulate, like light-poles and kerb-ways, seem to be moving, fluctuating. Sidestepping the world in increments so small most would say they were simply scintillating under the heat. I suspect I am becoming more attuned to the lives of an inanimate reality, a normally unobserved, jejune universe, although the impulses of my mind and body are loath to coincide.

Taking a red robin-breasted *petit* taxi to the filthy main bus station.

Checking in my baggage for the next day's journey.

Gawking at the waiting passengers who are gawking right back at me.

Paying for the insurance and it seems fair enough.

Pocketing the chit, although swaying on my feet.

Ignoring the sliding doors as they accuse me of cowardice.

Swimming through an oscillating mirage, full of ghosts and apparitions.

Taking down on a scrap of paper a shimmering French woman's hurried and frightened directions to the Youth Hostel. She doesn't want to appear rude but she obviously wants scare me to get away from her as fast as possible. I do her a favour and hurry off but I lose my footing on the rolling street.

Around a towering mountain of jacaranda blossoms the two wrinkled black women are softly twittering to each other, as they empty their dilly bags full of the purple flowers onto the breathing, indistinct heap. They are laughing and warm. There is a conveyor belt from the mineshafts delivering more petals to their side, and fumes from the smelter drift into the hot Isa air, while my mother, who was one of the aunties, says: "*Weelow*. That not a good bird for you, Sterling," and her dilly bag - although it is woven from bulrushes and is not really entitled to an opinion - pipes up, grinning, and repeats: "Not a good bird for you, Sterling". Then the wind finds its musical momentum and the educated blossoms fly away in a misty mauve blanket and my mother spreads her wings and climbs high into the solid sky and a man in a tight white turban is helping me to my feet, making chirruping sounds as if I were an injured child.

It all seems to be happening as in a dream, I tell him. A day-Dream. A half-DREAM, and I do believe I'm shouting. But sometimes a dream is all a man has, although too often the nightmares enter and toss you about brutally. Goddamn it, why can't you understand me, you bastard, all you bastards, and so I meander and spin along the underpinning avenues of Casablanca, unanswered.

After some two to three hours of staring in amusement at the strangely dressed locals and sampling bite by testy bite of the *Tajine* and giant olives and *Couscous* and other Moroccan delicacies from the many street stalls where I order my repast with unenthusiastic sign language, I finally find a door to understanding. Quite suddenly, Casablanca opens up for me. Darkness has come and the empty but still illuminated temples of commerce watch innocuously from the otherwise dark skyline. Their floor to ceiling windowed eyes are seeing all but comprehending nothing and I feel superior to every synthetic thing that is there.

Ah, but that, now that smells good, as I sense something truly appetising at last. My bloodstream is suddenly rinsed with adrenaline, the hormone of fight or flight, and I can feel the fine courage crystallising on my lips.

The metallic scent of blood wafts towards me, I guess, from a block or more away, drawing me ineluctably in its direction. As I turn the corner I espy two youngish female tourists. They are under-dressed African-Americans and are both (typically) quite stout, that is, I should not hesitate to say, they are morbidly obese, with tyres of adipose spilling over their belts. Their swollen bodies are slowly but relentlessly obeying the dictates of gravity and are well and truly heading south.

If I could ever get my arms to equal theirs in girth I would win Mr. Universe.

The blue-black soul sistas, with their braided faux hair weaves and horn-like painted toenails, are emitting the unmistakeably pungent aroma of menstruation, checked only fractionally by recently positioned lavender scented sanitary pads. Such a funk is emanating from their frizzy Negro apertures, the smell threatens my consciousness and all but overpowers my will to remain standing with its corporeal solidity. I can almost taste the sanguine velvet flowing out from between their cellulite legs and, both confused and disgusted, I turn on my heels and run. Perhaps, though, 'flee' is a more accurate descriptor.